

National Elk Refuge History

A Legacy of Wildlife Conservation



Jackson Hole History

Following the removal of most of the beaver by trappers prior to 1840, Jackson Hole was virtually uninhabited by settlers until 1884. Only hunting and gathering native Americans (mostly Shoshone, Bannock, and Arapahoe) summered here until about the end of the Civil War (1865).

Sixty-four people lived in Jackson Hole when the Wyoming Territory became a state in 1890. Nearby Yellowstone had become the world's first national park 1872. By the late 1890s and early 1900s, conversion of historic elk winter range to domestic livestock range began threaten the Jackson Hole Elk Herd.



Town of Jackson between 1907 and 1912.

Elk in Trouble

Early hunters and settlers noted that winters of unusually heavy snow resulted in death by starvation for thousands of elk. Elk survival was complicated further by the severe winters of 1909, 1910, and 1911. In order to survive, the elk raided ranchers' haystacks, but many still starved to death. Although ranchers did not want to see the elk die, they could not afford to lose their hay and remain in the ranching business.

The National Elk Refuge

The Jackson Elk Herd, estimated at

approximately 13,500 animals



A series of harsh winters caused widespread starvation in the Jackson Hole Elk Herd.

today, probably owes its prosperity to the local citizens of 1912.

The first official suggestion for a permanent elk refuge in Jackson Hole was made in 1906 by the Wyoming State Game Warden, D.C. Nowlin, who, following his retirement from that post, became the first manager of the National Elk Refuge.

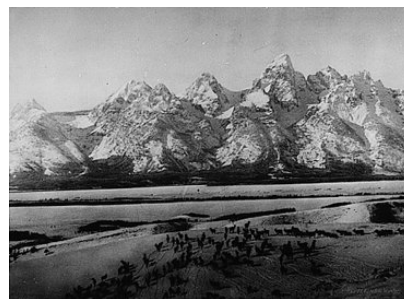
Area residents gained statewide sympathy for the continuing elk losses, and appeals for assistance spread through many other states. As a result, in 1911 the Wyoming Legislature asked Congress to cooperate with the State in appropriations for "feeding, protecting, and otherwise preserving the big game which winters in great numbers within the confines of the State of Wyoming."

Less than a month later, Congress appropriated \$20,000 for feeding, protecting, and transplanting of elk and ordered an investigation of the elk situation in Wyoming. After this initial assessment by the federal government, \$45,000 was appropriated by an act of Congress on August 10, 1912 for the purchase

of lands and maintenance of a refuge for wintering elk.

Refuge Expansion

By 1916, from a combination of public domain lands and private lands, 2,760 acres had been acquired for the National Elk Refuge. For more than ten years, no additions were made to the refuge. In 1918, the U.S. Forest Service lands adjacent to the east side of the refuge were classified as big game winter range, and although they were not made part of the refuge, livestock grazing was restricted. In 1927 Congress accepted title to 1,760 acres of private ranch lands that had been acquired and donated by the Izaak Walton League of America, expanding the refuge to 4,520 acres.



Elk with Teton Range

In a 1935 act that became known as the "Six Million Dollar Fund," Congress designated money for purchase of wildlife lands throughout the United States. From this, about 16,400 additional acres of private lands were acquired for the National Elk Refuge. Also, 3,783 acres of public domain lands were added by Presidential Executive orders in 1935 and 1936.

Today the refuge consists of nearly 25,000 acres devoted to elk winter

Photo courtesy of the Jackson Hole Historical Society & Museum 1908.023.001

Photo courtesy of the Jackson Hole Historical Society & Museum 1958.2611.001



(continued from front)

range. This represents the last remaining elk winter range in Jackson Hole.

Supplemental Feeding

Supplemental feeding began in 1910 when the Wyoming Legislature appropriated \$5,000 to purchase available hay in the valley to feed the elk. The supply of hay was inadequate and hundreds of elk died that winter. This was followed in 1911 with \$20,000 from Congress to feed elk. Supplemental feed has been provided for the elk in all but nine winters since then.

Significance of Jackson Hole Elk Herd

A Presidential "Commission on the Conservation of the Elk of Jackson Hole, Wyoming," was established and active from 1927 through 1935. Its membership, which included the Governor of Wyoming, developed the following tenet: "The Jackson Hole Elk Herd in the State of Wyoming is a national resource combining economic, aesthetic, and recreation values in which the State of Wyoming, the federal government, private citizens, and civic and sportsmen's organizations are actively participating."

In 1958, the Jackson Hole Cooperative Elk Studies Group was

formed, composed of the Wyoming Game & Fish Department, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and the National Park Service. The principal purpose of this group is to coordinate plans, programs, and findings of studies, and to provide an exchange of ideas, information, and personnel to study the elk herd and its habitat. All four agencies have legal responsibilities for management of the elk herd and its habitat. A better understanding and appreciation of individual agency objectives and responsibilities have been attained since the establishment of the study group.

For more information contact:

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National Elk Refuge Timeline

Until 1864	Jackson Hole virtually uninhabited. Periodic beaver trappers
1866	Law prohibiting the seasonal sale of elk meat.
1871	Closed game seasons enacted.
1872	Yellowstone NP established.
1884	First homesteaders on National Elk Refuge
1886	All peace officers can enforce game laws.
1889	65 population of valley
1890-1900	Conversion of elk range to livestock use and sale of game meat prohibited.
1880's	Severe winters
1897	10,000 elk starve in winter
1898	The Miller House built on present day Refuge.
1902	D.C. Nowlin appointed 2nd game warden of area.
1904	Hunters killing elk for ivories.
1905	Teton Game Reserve established
1906	First suggestion of permanent elk refuge
1908	Robert Miller becomes first superintendent of Teton National Forest.
1910	Law prohibits killing elk for teeth,. State appropriates \$5,000 for hay for elk.
1911	2,500 elk die in winter. Congress appropriates \$20,000 to feed, restock and investigate elk situation. E.A. Preble of US biological survey and D.C. Nowlin study Wyoming elk situation.
1912	August 10, 1912, Congress appropriates \$45,000 to purchase elk winter range and D.C. Nowlin appointed first refuge manager.
1914	Miller property (1,240+ acres) purchased for Refuge. Miller house becomes first refuge office. Called Government Ranch by locals.
1916	Refuge grows to 2,760 acres
1918	Forest lands east of the refuge designated as big game winter range.
1923	Almer Nelson refuge manager for 33 years.
1925	Izaak Walton League purchase 1,760 acres for refuge to expand to 4,500 acres.
1928	Olaus Murie studies elk on refuge.
1935-36	16,400 acres of private land become refuge with an act of Congress (\$6 million Fund). 3,783 acres of public domain lands added.
1938	Four trumpeter swan cygnets from Red Rocks Lakes NWR transplanted to NER.
1943	Hunting started on National Elk Refuge.
1944	15,000 elk in Jackson Hole herd
1995	Elk exhibition pasture constructed on Refuge
1957	Boy scouts collect antlers on refuge.
1960	First antler arch built on Town Square
1965	First sleigh rides on east side of Refuge.
1975	Feed switched from baled hay to pellet alfalfa
1990's	Ecological elk studies — herd and population dynamics, radio telemetry and diseases.
1994	Sleigh Rides move to west side of Refuge.
1998	Refuge operates visitor center in association with other public lands and non-profit groups.